

Library Innovation Studios: Transforming Rural Communities

Select Passages of Grant Application to Point out the Relationship of Makerspaces to Community and Economic Development and To Point out IMLS's interest in libraries serving as Community Anchors that serve as Catalysts for Economic and Community Development

The **premise of this project** is to provide rural libraries a tested model with a path to address the library field-wide challenge of establishing themselves as **community anchors that serve as catalysts for economic and community development**. Nebraska is an ideal setting to develop a new, replicable, and responsive library programming model for rural libraries since 232 (88%) of its 264 public libraries serve fewer than 5,000 residents.

The viability of rural communities and their libraries depends on the ability to operate in a global economy, support a workforce with up-to-date technology and STEM skills, energize local business, and provide support for sustainable local entrepreneurship. The resources to meet these needs are often underdeveloped in rural communities. Rural libraries could be at the center of needed community revitalization, but without models and guidebooks they can struggle to fill the role of strong community anchors that can enhance civic engagement, cultural opportunities, lifelong learning, and economic vitality.

The blending of the Maker movement (including human centered design) and the participatory engagement model is an essential part of our proposal. The maker movement includes elements of low-cost digital tools, community infrastructure, and the maker mindset (e.g. playful, asset and growth oriented, failure positive, and collaborative).ⁱ Participatory engagement, often used in city and regional planning, “collects actionable information, empowers residents, and legitimizes official or institutional activities within communities.”ⁱⁱ Libraries and other informal learning environments are also important to this expansion of Making since they have the potential to reach students (and adult learners) that may not identify as Makers.ⁱⁱⁱ The community infrastructure is vital because it enables engagement (through person-to-person interaction, workshops, and meetings) in a physical space, online resources, showcase events (Maker Showcases), and mentoring.^{iv}

The need to improve and create communities that attract and retain people and businesses in rural areas is evidenced by the number of assistance efforts developed in recent years. For instance, USDA supports more than fifty financial assistance programs covering energy, infrastructure investment, business development, community development, and micro-entrepreneur assistance. Like many other states offering University and county-based extension services, Nebraska Extension has worked with the state's regions to develop and implement a collaborative economic development plan for action through its Strengthening Economies Together (SET) initiative. In addition, Nebraska Extension engages youth statewide with its Community Vitality Initiative (CVI) entrepreneurship program, encouraging young people to explore business and entrepreneurial career options. Many of these programs, however, operate independently of library programs and initiatives. Our project seeks to place the **rural library at the center** of these efforts, using the traditional role libraries play as “the people's university” serving the needs of all people. Our project will utilize the existing structure of the library as a community anchor, expanding and strengthening it to enable the rural library to serve as a catalyst that drives economic and community development.

The Maker model offers an opportunity that can enable rural libraries to address their communities' needs, thereby solidifying their role as community anchors. The Maker movement, while not a new phenomenon, has been utilized infrequently in rural areas.^v This project will expand upon other initiatives and will provide a replicable model of building community vitality with rural libraries at the center of the effort.

The competition to draw new businesses to communities has become intense, through tax incentives and other means. It is more likely that business growth will occur in a community when local entrepreneurs start new businesses there or when businesses already present in the community expand their operations.^{vi} Rural economic development can be addressed by using local partners (including extension educators), human-centered design, the Maker mindset, and the local library. But many rural communities and their libraries have yet to effectively address local needs and challenges in this way. These approaches offer significant potential to leverage and share community knowledge, innovation, and ideas. Rural libraries, which often feel isolated, need a guidebook to engage the community in vitality efforts. This project will **provide a model** containing the elements necessary to bring about community success and to allow libraries to initiate collective impact by leveraging the resources of other key community entities.

Project Design

The proposed project uses Makerspaces, community engagement tools, and training to develop a model for rural libraries to expand their role as community anchor organizations that drive economic and community development. This multi-faceted effort will 1) establish local Community Action Teams in 30 rural communities; 2) purchase equipment and related materials for four rotating Innovation Studios; 3) develop instructional materials and equipment certification processes; 4) employ intentional sustainability strategies for permanent studios; 5) provide training on the use of the equipment, including Train the Trainer strategies; 6) assist with local marketing efforts and programming/events, including Open Houses and Maker Showcases; 7) host annual Inventors Showcases in Lincoln, 8) disseminate information to enable national replication; and 9) conduct formative, summative, and outcome-based evaluation. The infusion of the Maker culture into rural areas will increase community buoyancy by strengthening services and facilitating local economic development and entrepreneurship.